

Conklin: Saturday Morning Art Class

NURTURING Creative in studios

For art education students and local children, Saturday mornings are prime time for coaxing the imaginative muse

By Tammy Conklin

Photography by Tim O'Shea



Rainbow Flower, a painting by workshop participant Julia Calagiovanni.

You never know when that next teachable moment will strike. Junior art education students Cory Kellerson and Shawn Curtis aren't looking for it this Saturday morning, but then, suddenly, there it is.

Kellerson has meticulously prepared a lesson on contour drawing for the handful of children attending an art workshop, and everything is going smoothly. Then it happens. One of the children quietly breaks into tears. A look of terror crosses Kellerson's goateed face. He quickly huddles with Curtis. After a few seconds the dilemma is solved. A rare sunny autumn day provides the necessary diversion. The guys pack up their lessons and take the class outside. A lesson on contour drawing can work just as well with props from Mother Nature.

For students in the art education program of the School of Art and Design—a collaborative program of the College of Visual and Performing Arts and the School of Education—Saturday mornings can be filled with these mini-dramas, but usually they're just plain fun. Through the Skytop Art Workshops for Young People, art education students put their classroom training into practice. For eight weeks, SU students develop lessons on various aspects of art and share their ideas with children from local elementary and junior high schools. The workshops, which drew about 45 children this past fall, feature 75-minute weekly sessions and culminate with a student show.

They are part of Professor Hope Irvine's Methods and Practice in Teaching Art course, required of all art education majors. Students pair up with a different teaching partner each week, one teaching while the

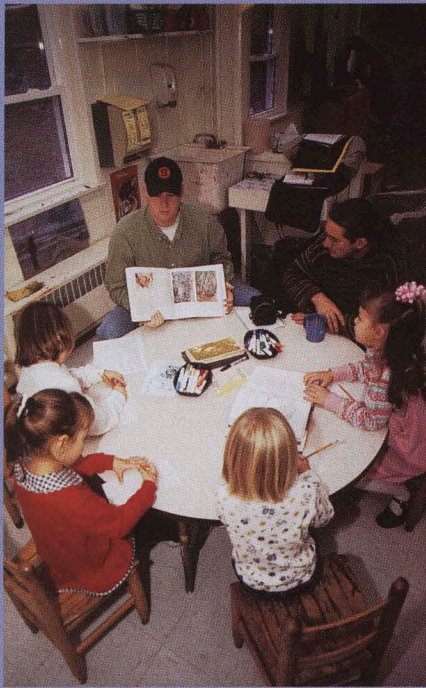
other assists. The teacher must have a lesson plan ready to share with the assistant a few days before the workshop. "We have two Saturday sessions," says graduate teaching assistant Pam McLaughlin. "The program is designed to get every student into the classroom every week."

Irvine, chair of the Department of Art Education since 1982, found a program in need of revision when she arrived at SU. "There were hardly any people in the program," she recalls. "The workshops were more for the little kids. I decided the workshops should give our students experiences they could actually use. I wanted them to see the whole range of ages they would encounter in the classroom."

The workshops are a turning point for art education students. According to Irvine, as they make the gradual transition from student to teacher, they begin to channel their creative energy differently. Until this point, most students concentrate on artistic self-expression or the historical significance of art in society. As art educators, they must now shift their focus to inspire others. "In this program, students learn to balance their own talent with the desire to teach," Irvine says.

A board member of the National Art Education Association, Irvine is well aware of the hardships that come with an art education career, and prepares her students for the realities of their chosen field. "I encourage them to be not just art teachers, but advocates for art education," she says. "We know that when it comes to allocation of funding, art is often at the bottom of the list in many schools."

Irvine says it is important for art teachers to continue pursuing creative endeavors and honing their skills. "They must continue to take their own creative risks if they are to convince their students to do the



The Skytop Art Workshops for Young People offer art education students opportunities to apply their skills in a classroom setting.

same," she says. "It is risky to do your own work and hang it on a wall. But risk and mess are two things artists understand. When you are working in such a demand-

"This is an important opportunity because you apply what you learned in class to a real situation."

ing job, you need to constantly renew your energy by doing your own work."

Junior Rebecca Rothamel found that the workshops reinforced her decision to

teach. "This is an important opportunity because you apply what you learned in class to a real situation," she says. During one week, a student may teach 8- and 9-year-olds. The following week the student will be the teaching assistant for that age group. On the third week, the student will work with another age group. "The 8- and 9-year-olds tend to be the largest group," says McLaughlin, who supervises the workshops. Occasionally groups for older students may include only a single participant. The smaller classes, while not typical of today's classrooms, provide the most effective indication of how well students connect with a particular age level.

Sitting on a chair clearly designed for a preschooler, senior Shirley Ting beams as she explains a lesson to workshop participants Peter Klim, 7, and Rachel Heagerty, 6. "Today, we are going to draw ourselves," she says. Before turning them loose with paper and markers, Ting first tries to impart a little art history. She shows them portraits done by artists ranging from

masters to novices. The children, immediately set at ease by Ting's warm smile and gentle manner, share their thoughts on the portraits. Peter describes how he thinks the light was hitting the subjects' faces when the portraits were painted. Later, when asked for his thoughts on the workshops, Peter prefers to discuss the high points of a movie he recently saw. Junior Mikkell Guthartz, Ting's partner for the day, laughs at Peter's vivid descriptions. She has seen this many times in the past several weeks. Once the lessons are over, the little kids are ready to spend the rest of their Saturday morning simply being kids.

By the time students like Rothamel and Ting participate in the workshops, they are confident in their choice of major. For others, the workshops offer opportunities to evaluate their strengths



Art education student Shawn Curtis '00 helps a workshop participant with a drawing assignment. SU students work closely with the children to help develop their creative talents.



Junior Lauren Renda, right, helps a workshop participant with a project as parents and visitors check out an exhibit.

and weaknesses in a classroom setting before deciding on a career. Junior Jennie Schaeffer, for example, seems to have a natural rapport with young children, but it did not come easily. As a result, she has decided that teaching at the elementary level is not for her. "I used to be afraid of getting to the level of the elementary school-age kids. I found it difficult," Schaeffer admits. "But it was important for me to find that out now. I really think my strength is at the high school level. I am thinking about the possibility of working with a museum education program."

Because their teaching partners change from week to week, students quickly learn the fine art of cooperation. Since they discuss the lessons beforehand, the collaborations usually succeed. But as the workshops continue and teaching styles form, it may become harder for students to adapt one style to another. "Both of you have your own way of teaching," Guthartz says. "That's good because you really get a chance to see different ways of doing things."

While adaptation skills can be learned, Irvine concedes that a great artist doesn't always make for a great art teacher. Some people are just not meant for the classroom, and she has no qualms about steering those students in other directions. "This program isn't for people who want a teaching degree as a backup," Irvine says. "I want them to be as fanatical about it as I am. It's just too hard to do it as a fallback."

"I have to think of the important things and try to make sure they leave here with knowledge they didn't have before they arrived."

Building the perfect art lesson

"What does the word 'contour' mean?" Cory Kellerson asks the five students in his workshop. With a lot of shoulder shrugs in response, Kellerson slips off his hiking boot and sets it beside a drawing of the boot. In age-appropriate language, he explains what contour is and informs the group of the day's assignment. The children seem impressed—until they learn they will be drawing their own shoes. The idea is met with a collective protest: "That's too hard!" Kellerson is undeterred.

Slowly, the children begin to draw. Some of the drawings look like shoes, others don't, but everyone tries. Kellerson and Curtis connect like pros with the young artists. The fact that one of the children eventually becomes frustrated probably has little to do with the subject matter, but the incident gives the future teachers food for thought. "Maybe the lesson was a little too complicated for this age level," Kellerson concedes.

Or perhaps not. Once the children return from their outdoor excursion, they see their work in a different light. Emily Schultz, 9, laughs at her shoe drawing, then proudly tells Curtis: "When I'm a teenager, I will be the best artist in the world!"

For art education majors, planning a good lesson is the key to a stress-free Saturday workshop, and

it is no easy job. "There are so many different factors to consider when you are preparing a lesson," Curtis explains. "The kids are all at different skill levels. You have to make a lesson plan general enough to be flexible, but you don't want the kids to get bored."

"Parents expect there will be drawings and paintings to see at the end of this," Kellerson adds. "I have to think of the important things and try to make sure they leave here with knowledge they didn't have before they arrived."

So how do students decide what topics to address in the workshops? Junior Kathleen Kane, who planned a well-received lesson on basic geometric shapes for the 8- and 9-year-old group, considers what the children may have already learned. Kane says her ability to judge the age-appropriateness of a lesson idea improved as the workshops progressed. "I figured at this age a lesson on basic geometric shapes would work because it relates to what they have already done, yet is a new concept. By using a still life and having them draw that, I've given them a visual example. Seeing the shapes allows them to understand what I'm trying to explain."

"Time management is another key factor in planning the lessons, and that's one area in which I have improved this semester," says Jennie Schaeffer, Kane's partner for this particular workshop. "Having two people work together is helpful because



The work of participants is displayed in a show at the end of each semester. Kate Zagraniczny painted *The Wild Flower* in a group taught by SU students Marissa Weiss and Marina Kramvi.

it's easier to get the kids to settle down and focus on what they're doing."

Irvine reports that behavior problems in the workshops are extremely rare. Rothamel suggests that because the program is run by students, the children relate better to their instructors. Such bonding goes a long way. "Maybe because we are students, the kids don't feel as intimidated," Rothamel says. "It is a little more relaxed than what they are used to, but it has to be that way because we have to develop a rapport pretty quickly."

The program also familiarizes students with New York State teaching standards. Each student is provided with the latest drafts of the New York State Education Syllabi and Learning Standards to refer to when planning workshop lessons. "I want them to be fluent with the syllabi before they even set foot in a classroom," Irvine says.

A quick glance at the faculty rosters of local elementary and junior high schools is evidence of the program's solid reputation. More than a dozen local art teachers are recent SU graduates or are currently completing graduate work. Most of them maintain strong ties to the art education program. "We have a lot of excel-

lent art teachers in the city and county who have been very supportive," Irvine says. "They nurture the program." This fall, those teachers contributed to Making the Grade, a month-long exhibition of their students' work in the Burton Blatt Visitor's Center in Huntington Hall.

McLaughlin admits that part of what makes the workshops so successful has nothing to do with the students or the program. Many children—especially very young chil-

dren—have a natural tendency for artistic expression, she says. The challenge for art education students is to create lesson plans that tap into those natural interests and build on them. "We are always surprised by how talented many of these kids are," McLaughlin says. "A lot of them spend

a great deal of time drawing or painting at home and already have very strong skills."

Other children have limited interest or ability. "In every class, there are students who don't want to do what you're doing," Irvine says. "I encourage the students to find a way to include them in the lesson. When you're teaching, those are the kinds of issues you have to consider. If you want to be an art teacher, you have to encourage everyone. Most of the kids you teach are not going to grow up to be artists, but they can get some kind of appreciation for art that will develop as they get older. In that way, the art teacher is providing a substantial education."

With a variety of skill levels and temperaments to consider, students receive an early introduction to one of the hardest aspects of teaching—unpredictability. "I taught art for 24 years in north Manhattan in my first life," Irvine jokes. "You have to learn to think fast on your feet." The ability to improvise, as Kellerson and Curtis did with their contour drawing lesson, is a skill that Irvine tries to nurture in all her students. "They get better at adapting their lesson plans as the workshops go on," Irvine says. "That whole notion of adaptation is important for an art teacher today. When something isn't working, you have to shift gears. For some people it comes



Art education students devise lesson plans that challenge young artists. This mosaic tiger by Allison Arena was the result of one recent session.

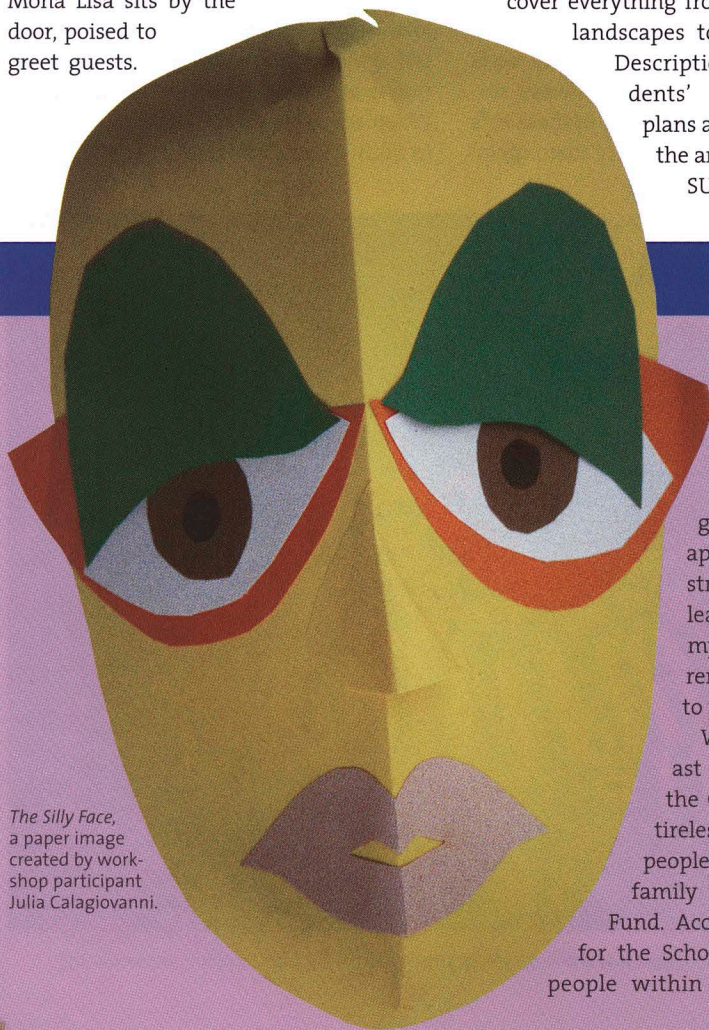
It's show time!

"We transform the entire building into gallery space," McLaughlin says. "By the time we get done with it, it doesn't even look like the same place." The walls of M-17 are first covered with white board, then with the hundreds of works children have created and collected in their pizza-box portfolios during the previous eight weeks. A huge cardboard cutout of the Mona Lisa sits by the door, poised to greet guests.

Once inside, visitors quickly realize the amazing scope of the children's work—and the lessons. In eight weeks, the students cover everything from cubist-inspired landscapes to graphic novels.

SU students spend

“It feels good to look around and see that all the preparations were worth it and



The Silly Face,
a paper image
created by work-
shop participant
Julia Calagiovanni.

Memorial fund benefits neighborhood kids

Wendie W. Blumin, who died last year, was a lifelong art enthusiast and frequent part-time student of SU's fine arts department in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. Her son remembers her tireless efforts to share her love of art with her family and the young people in the community. In honor of that dedication, the Blumin family established the Wendie W. Blumin Art Education Memorial Fund. According to Lori Golden, director of college-based development for the School of Education, the fund will provide scholarships to young people within the community to help defray the cost of the Syracuse



Junior Kathleen Kane, far left, explains the theme of an art exhibition during a Saturday morning workshop.

people are enjoying it," says junior Lauren Renda. "The show is not about how it makes us look, it's about how it looks to the kids."

Julia Calagiovanni is just 5 years old, but this is her second year as a program participant. A seasoned workshop veteran, she leads her parents around M-17, proudly showing them what she's done the past eight Saturday mornings. Her dad,

Richard Calagiovanni '70, a graduate student in the School of Information Studies, is delighted with the show. He and his wife, Alicia '74, G'77, G'85, explain that when their daughter expressed a strong interest in art, they were happy to learn their alma mater had a program for her. "Julia has always loved art," he says. "This program is great and she's gotten a lot out

of it. The students do a wonderful job and we are very happy to bring her here."

Senior Allison Weschler says the show also gives students a better idea of how their classmates' lesson plans worked in practice. "The show is an important part of the program because the kids, parents, and students get to see how much progress we've made in the workshops. When it's going on, things get so busy. Sometimes you don't really have a chance to look at what everyone else is doing."

Irvine says the show represents a culmination of the benefits students and participants receive from the program. Months and years down the road, long after the children's artwork has been removed from the walls, the experiences shared at M-17 will linger.

Irvine believes the students who become art teachers will be better prepared than they realize. "They won't use a lot of the work we do with them until they have been in the classroom a few years and feel secure," she says. "They probably won't even think about it. It will just come back. They'll be in their classrooms and will suddenly recall something they did here in this workshop."

University Skytop Art Workshops. The fund will also provide a boost to the program's supply budget.

"Certainly there are a lot of young people who have potential. Maybe they are in school districts that don't have the ability to provide the materials that would enable these children to realize that potential," Blumin says. "This fund will give those children a chance to attend these workshops."

After discussing the family's ideas for the fund with Hope Irvine, director of the art education program, Blumin was even more confident about the contribution. "Hope was very enthusiastic about this," he says. "The more I spoke to her, the more I felt like we were doing the right thing. She seemed so in tune with the purpose of this fund."

—TAMMY CONKLIN



SU participants in the Skytop Art Workshops for Young People take a break during the Color Wheel Student Show. The Wendie W. Blumin Art Education Memorial Fund will provide new support for the workshops.